PRINCIPLE THEMES IN JUDITH VIORST'S IT'S HARD TO BE HIP OVER THIRTY AND OTHER TRAGEDIES OF MARRIED LIFE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is at the present time another woman somewhere between the overly-aggressive female in Women's Lib and the sedate, "second-class" wife. This woman is the median of the two extremes. She is intelligent, creative, and self-willed, but not to the extent that she does not want or need a husband, family, and home. This woman has assimilated the good points of both her sister extremists. She portrays ideas of American life to which most women adhere: preoccupation with one's appearance, dreams of romantic fantasy, and final recognition of reality of one's situation. Most modern women have better educations than those in generations past, and along with education comes more freedom. As long as girls were taught only needlepoint and proper social etiquette, no one had to worry about male egos being deflated by presumptuous women who thought they could think, teach, or vote. But there evolved just such a woman; one who was not anti-man or anti-herself, but one who appreciates, as did Candide, the best of two worlds. Judith Viorst portrays this woman in her book of poems, It's Hard To Be Hip Over Thirty and Other Tragedies of Married Life.

The purpose of this paper then is to analyze the primary themes and techniques found in Mrs. Viorst's poetry. The structure of the poems and their content, which is a document of testimony to her situation as she understands it, are appropriate sources to provide insights into this median woman.

It is sometimes difficult to separate Mrs. Viorst from the persona of

the poems, but one must confine himself, where possible, to the persona who lives in a world that is definable. She is the American, upper middle-class wife who has qualities that are to be found in many women in this country, especially those who are in the same social class.

More specifically, after this introduction, the successive chapters will deal with structure and technical devices, and the three themes of preoccupation with one's appearance, dreams of romantic fantasy, and final recognition of the reality of one's situation.

CHAPTER II

STRUCTURE AND TECHNICAL DEVICES

The structure of Mrs. Viorst's book is found in four sections: "The First Years", "The Years After That", "The Vacation", and "The Adjustment." One immediately assumes that the progression of this book will begin with the idealism and enthusiasm usually present in young married couples and move gradually to the realistic recognition of the facts of marriage which tend to dampen the fires of the passionate youth. Not so in Mrs. Viorst's book! If anything, her beginning poem is more disheartening than the last, for the last poem at least shows some inner reconciliation that expresses hope and some reason for marriage as an American institution in the first place. There is no explicit explanation for this constant pessimism except that Mrs. Viorst was simply remembering the beginning years and while every married day opens the eyes a little wider, her memories of "The First Years" have been colored slightly by her present feelings.

Images abound in Mrs. Viorst's works to deepen the awareness of the reader of the world she presents. Pessimistic irony presented through the use of images and comic contrasts is evident in most of her poems. These images and comic contrasts help portray her tone and attitude of the various aspects of life she encounters. In "The Suburbanites", Mrs. Viorst says that "New York is a dirty town. Full of sex fiends and dope fiends, and irresponsible people crossing against the light,...".[1] This series of images brings a definite incongruity to mind. Comic contrasts and anti-

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[1]Judith Viorst, It's Hard To Be Hip Over Thirty and Other Tragedies Of Married Life (New York, 1968),p.27. (Subsequent references to this work will be cited in the body of the paper.)

climate statements, as expressed by these images, seem to play down the vicious image of the "sex fiend and dope fiend" (p.27,ll.4-5) by the utilization of still another offender of the law, the "person who crosses against the light"(p.27,l.5). This infraction is not a serious crime, but one of the crimes in the city of New York nevertheless. In the same poem Mrs. Viorst places "the Mafia"(p.27,l.23) directly after "litterbugs" (p.27, l.22), not expressing the idea exactly that she does not consider this organization large and dangerous, but illustrating the simple fact that again, these factions are both a part of New York City.

The entire poem consists of images from the city and seems to be out of place in a poem entitled "The Suburbanites", but the idea stated in this poem is the view of New York as seen by her neighbors in the suburbs. The first line of the poem is the primary line that gives this idea. Mrs. Viorst lets the readers know from this line, "They love it here"(p.27,l.1), that the following ideas are not hers, but ideas of the neighbors and again by calling them "they" she lets the readers know that she does not consider herself a part of this suburban faction. "(You could live your whole life on East Sixty-Fifth, they say, and the Welcom Wagon would never bring a Cake.)," (sic)(p.27,ll.33-35); the good neighbors firmly believe this sarcastic statement and maybe Mrs. Viorst does too, but the implication Mrs. Viorst seems to be making is, "Who cares?" She does not believe that receiving a cake is important in life anyway. These non-thinkers follow each other like sheep with no more problem confronting their intelligence than how to measure two cups of flour.

The various images which are grouped by Mrs. Viorst into motifs all form the same general theme in her work: although woman's longings for

"what might have been" and "what was" never die, she acknowledges reality, "what is", because she accepts reality as the finality in her life situations. She does not ignore the existence of an entire city simply because it has vice and corruption; she may not advocate such things, but as a "thinking" individual, she knows there is good as well as excitement that intermingles in the city and therefore cannot curse and condemn it as the other "suburban sheep" do.

Another technical note concerning Mrs. Viorst's appealing knack of using common place ideas and objects such as "chicken pot pies", "raincoats", and "operas"(p.15,ll.26-21-3) and weaving them into a humorous and witty poem should be included in the discussion of "The Honeymoon is over." In this poem she effectively places a hodge-podge of incidents of her early marriage into pleasing lines of amusing, yet intelligible poetry. Also, her rambling, run-on sentences add much to the illusion of daydreaming.

The reiterated phrase is a device Mrs. Viorst utilizes effectively. This reiteration is found in either the first or last line of a stanza. "Maybe We'll Make It"(p.19) is the title of one of her poems and is stated in the last line of each of the four stanzas. "The Other Woman"(p.36), another poem, is also the first line of each of the three stanzas. This refrain in free verse has a laconic quality that adds graphic insight to her poems.

CHAPTER III

THREE THEMES IN POEMS

I. PREOCCUPATION WITH ONE'S APPEARANCE

In the first of her three themes, Mrs. Viorst's persona portrays a combination of romantic optimism with realistic pessimism. Her persona begins with preconceived, fanciful notions, undoubtedly prompted by frequent exposure to romantic fiction, and then slowly transmits meaningful insights into the realistic, married world, which are terrifying insights to the unmarried, but humorous realizations to the married. The thought that constantly echoes in the reader's minds is "What a funny way to mirror such a painfully true condition." One such condition is her insecure feelings on a trip to France in which Mrs. Viorst describes her attempts to present to the Parisians the appearance of an intelligent, sophisticated American woman. In this poem, "In Paris," she states:

> I am (where else?) at the Deux Magots
> Moodily drinking a pernod
> And trying to think thoughts
> Jean-Paul Sartre would respect
> And trying to convey the impression
> That I am someone with a rich full inner life
> Instead of someone
> Who gets palpitations
> When the washer-dryer breaks down (p.56).

The woman portrayed here is educated enough to be acquainted with the philosophy of Sartre, wealthy enough to be in a fashionable Paris cafe, honest enough to realize that what is actually important to a wife is security (if she were secure she would not care what they thought), but still insecure

to the extent that she does not want other people to see through her sophisticated facade. Preoccupation with one's appearance has long been an important element in the workings of American middle-class lives, and the persona, with her intelligence and experience, cannot completely erase the conditioning of our society.

Americans have indeed been examples to others for so many years that everyone has certainly been conditioned to care for or at least be aware of his own image or appearance. In relation to our social pressures and standards, this conditioning has worked extremely well on everyone, no matter how distant and aloof, independent, or arrogant he seems to be. Everyone knows how to "act" at given occasions and people adhere to the written and unwritten rules of society.

The idea of appearance in American life is illustrated in the poem "Choices" which relates that there are specific groups of people that a couple will meet and have to make decisions about. There are the "fun couples who own works of art that are strawberry malteds in plaster"(p.29, ll.2-3), the "social leaders who know how to act at horse shows" (p.29,ll. 21-22), and the "self-improvers who buy quality paperbacks"(p.29,ll.24-25), but true to the American way of life the woman in the poem states "we can't decide who we want them to think we are."(p.29,ll.28-30). A decidedly honest statement for such a dishonest idea!

Parents also tend to give life and credence to these commands or codes of society on appearance, and one inheritance a child can always expect is the knowledge of "the thing to do." Mothers, no matter what kind of men they marry, always know the perfect man for their daughters; and they are always as proud, when a good "catch" is made, as if they had made it them-

selves. Lines from "A Good Catch" support this idea.

> Although he is still wearing his college ring,
> And driving a white Imperial,
> And taking girls to supper clubs where
> the entire meal is served flambe
> Because he still thinks the more
> flames the better,
> Freddie the bachelor
> Is what is known in New Jersey as
> A good catch (p.16).

College rings mean a great deal to the newly matriculated, but as time passes and people get older, their tastes change, and because money is more available, people buy other types of rings. The college ring serves a function however, and that is to let others know he has graduated from a college. The prestige of attending college still brings forth connotations of wealth, intelligence, and "class" that ultimately result in admiration from the observer. In many social circles, Cadillacs are expensive cars driven by the newly-rich, those without "class" and breeding, only money, and this group is looked down on by the social group who has everything including "Imperials" (p.16,l.2) which are cars that are just as expensive but not quite as numerous among members of the other classes.

Appearance can change its meaning with the changing times, and as many aging people have observed, this aspect is one of the things that dates them. It may be just the thing for Freddie to have "waves" (p.17,l.1) in his hair or "caps on his teeth" (p.17,l.2), "A Good Catch," but that appearance at another time may be ridiculous. Freddie's "Danish-modern apartment" (p.17, l.22) is also as dated as the "football cheers and fraternity handshake" (p.17,ll.14-15) he still remembers. Mrs. Viorst's implications here are obviously that one's appearance indicates whether he will be accepted by

the social group he desires and also whether he will be admired and respected, or ridiculed and rejected.

If a person has important influential contacts, his own appearance is much more appealing to others. Most people agree that "who you know" is as important, if not more so, than "what you know" and Judith Viorst illustrates this peculiar truth of human nature in this same poem "A Good Catch." Opportunities are more plentiful for those who have a benefactor or patron, name-dropping is a most popular pastime in social circles, and many "friendships" are formed for two main reasons: to further business careers and social appearances. Mothers are especially interested in these things, for their daughters and for the reflection on their own appearances. When daughters marry whom they please, as most do, mothers can always wait because there will come a time when they can confidently tell their son-in-law about the man their daughter could have had. Mrs. Viorst has observed this fact evidently, because she writes:

> And whenever my husband is showing
> What is known in New Jersey as no respect
> For my mother,
> She tells about Freddie the bachelor,
> Who never talks back and is such
> A good catch (p.17,11.33-38).

Freddie, as Mrs. Viorst states, also has "important contacts such as a nephew of the Congressman from Flushing" (p.17,11.30-32). This image of prestige is as amusing as the "welcome wagon that never brings a cake in New York" (p.27,1.35). Mrs. Viorst's implicit statement seems to be, in all her poems, "What good is it anyway?" She has again shown that she has a list of priorities just as everyone else, but she has more important items

to head her list. She decides that to receive a cake from the welcome wagon or to know a nephew of a congressman is not important enought to dwell on. Induced sophistication is a major problem in our society and preoccupation with appearance has been the primary cause.

II. ROMANTIC FANTASY

Romantic illusions, which are impractical, unreal or misleading appearances, engulf most women regardless of age, wealth, politics, or religion, and the intelligent woman pictured by Mrs. Viorst is no exception. This woman is well-adjusted as she must be in order to survive the traumatic reality of her life, but keeps her idealistic dreams nevertheless. The progression from romantic fantasy to reality is evident in many of Mrs. Viorst's poems. The light, flirtatious tone of expectation changes to that of rejection in these lines from the poem "Aboard the SS France:"

> I was expecting
> Gay flirtations on the promenade deck,
> Smoldering glances across the mid-morning bouillon,
> An improper proposal or two
> Deftly turned away with regretful sighs.
> But no one asked (p.53).

Seemingly written tongue-in-cheek, Mrs. Viorst in actuality expresses a truth. Most women no matter how happily married, have a desire to be appreciated by other men even though they might never be sincerely interested in getting involved. An occasional appreciative glance helps one forget that age thirty is past and that presently youth is in vogue. Approaching her clearer understanding of reality again in the same poem, Mrs. Viorst adopts a more cynical tone:

So the next time I want a fleeting moment of passion
With the wind and the salt spray in my hair
And someone bitter but basically worthwhile
Laying his soul bare
Beside me, at the rail
I think I'll take the Hudson River Day Line (p.53).

Romantic illusions are stripped from this stanza and the lines support the idea that money is wasted traveling to romantic France. The poet now discards the romantic idealism and implicitly states that romance is a state of mind and cannot be forced or brought about by expensive trips to romantic countries.

The turning point between youth and maturity is the change from "what might be" to "what is." Mrs. Viorst expresses the mature idea of "what is" only after cautiously trying to enter a new situation of "what might be." No matter what her age, religion, or political convictions, the emotional part of any woman always wants to be swept away in her fantasy. Every woman finally realizes that the "hero on the white charger" is a complete impossibility, but for some strange reason, the dreaming never actually stops. The extent of romantic idealism varies in different women, but few would even attempt to refute its existence. In the poem "Maybe We'll Make It," Mrs. Viorst suggests that both partners are a bit idealistic, but, feeling, supposedly, that she knows women better, she does not recognize the possibility of an idealistic mate in many of her other poems. She states in this poem however, that both partners expect certain things from each other and both naturally become disenchanted when one's mate fails to reach the other's expectations. People, when first married, try very hard to please each other, but after a certain period, their attempts are not as frequent or as intense. In this poem she says:

If I quit hoping he'll show up with flowers, and
He quits hoping I'll squeeze him an orange, and
I quit shaving my legs with his razor, and
He quits wiping his feet with my face towel, and
We avoid discussions like...
Suppose I died, which one of our friends would he marry,
Maybe we'll make it (p.19).

The problems that arise in everyday life drain the vitality out of marriage and the idea that two thinking individuals can, in all respects, blend perfectly with no difficulties is completely absurd. Married couples find that too many expectations, and especially those of a romantic nature, destroy the idealistic haze that enveloped them as a "courting couple." Personal habits, beliefs, and simply lack of time provide most couples with enough arguments to last forever, and as a marriage progresses, individual differences become greater and more maturity is needed to compensate for this gulf. Some cannot cope with the change from romantic to realistic situations such as the couple in the poem "The Divorce".

Mark and June
Who were such a perfect match
That everyone used to say how perfect they were
Are getting a divorce,...(p.65,ll.1-4).

Mrs. Viorst portrays in this poem a stereotyped image of a man who is practical, conventional, and relatively simple in his tastes. The woman is not stereotyped generally, but certainly portrays the type of woman one would expect Mrs. Viorst to present. "June" is individualistic, well-read, and romantic.

He only likes spy movies and Audrey Hepburn movies
and movies that leave you feeling good and
She only likes early Chaplin movies and movies with
subtitles and movies that leave you feeling
rotten and

He thinks Maria Montessori is a fascist and
She thinks Will and Ariel Durant have an unwholesome
relationship and
He says she should pick up his socks and drop them
in the hamper and
She says he should (p.65).

After listing the numerous differences between the two people, and making a comment on the spoils of divorce, (June kept everything except the "honda," "dog," and "orthodontia bills") (p.65,11.26-27), Mrs. Viorst ends by asking, "How come we thought they were such a perfect match?"(p.65,1.35). They are now seen as individuals with differences; before, they were viewed as a young couple deeply in love, and no one at that point gave any thought to the trivialities that endanger the togetherness of couples. The idea of the "rose-covered cottage" diminished gradually after the brick "split-level" became more popular, but the connotation of the "cottage" still remains as the idealistic dream of many who do not completely understand all that marriage entails. A romantic fog seems to surround each partner, and that fog only lifts after the marriage is finally believed to be real. Then, the couple begins to view the other more clearly. Similarly, Mrs. Viorst's poem "The Other Woman" supports this unromantic insight into another problem that exists in marriages and also illustrates her matter-of-fact explanation of this phenomenon:

The other woman
Never has to look at Secret Squirrel,
And spends her money on fun furs
While we are spending ours on obstetricians,
And can make a husband feel that he is wanted,
Because it's easier to want a husband
When you're not married (p.37).

Mrs. Viorst's implication in this poem is a truth in reality, not fantasy; almost every woman wants what she does not have. This desire has made most women unhappy or at least dissatisfied with their lot at some point in their lives. The "other woman" does not, as Mrs. Viorst states, have to contend with the tiresome chores that plague the wife. She, instead, has the distinct thrill of clandestine meetings, dinners out unless she feels like "playing house", and most of the advantages of marriage without the disadvantages. This view is certainly subjective, but one that strengthens Mrs. Viorst's argument for the plight of the housewife.

Because of romantic ideas, the question "What do we actually have in common?" (p.15,l.9) rarely comes up during courtship, and if it does, the answers seem to come delightfully easily and abundantly. When this same question is asked after marriage, the answers are not as readily attainable. Mrs. Viorst observes this truth in marriage and the persona expresses again the idea of "what might have been" in contrast to "what is." In "The Honeymoon Is Over", as Mrs. Viorst's persona steps into her role as the modern, model housewife, dressed in a "green Dacron dry-mopping outfit from Saks" (p.15,l.12), she starts to wonder why she is here, "dry-mopping" (p.15,l.11) a very unglamorous floor instead of "dancing in the dark or rejecting princes" (p.15,ll.13-14) or "hearing people gasp at her one-man show" (p.15,l.15) and whisper admiringly, "My God, so beautiful and so gifted!" (p.15,l.16). What could be a more natural reaction to having one's honeymoon bubble burst by being thrust into menial household tasks, than daydreaming about what she could have been, had she not married.

Her daydreams end in the fourth stanza of this poem, "The Honeymoon Is Over." She realizes that there will not be a handsome prince to rescue

her from her drudgery because she "never knew a Prince" (p.15,l.17), and she has evidently gained some experience since her honeymoon, because now she sees the impracticality of eating always by candlelight, since "candlelight makes us squint" (p.15,l.19). At this point she understands that certain faults she pleasantly put up with while dating her husband, she cannot now tolerate:

> And that all the time
> I was letting him borrow my comb and hang up his
> wet raincoat in my closet,
> I was really waiting
> To stop letting him (p.15).

Mrs. Viorst sums up these disturbing thoughts of a less than ideal marriage beautifully. The unreal quality of life veils unpleasantries during courtship, but somehow lucid reality sets in almost immediately after the ceremony. But after ruminating over her disappointments and disillusionment, she adds, "I guess they call this getting to know each other."(p.15,l.29).

In a more general sense, "The Honeymoon is Over" conveys the idea that although it is fun to dream and romanticize, one gradually realizes that people are far from perfect and thus, so is life. People have faults, and these should not be glossed over, but recognized and dealt with rationally. The poem further suggests that even though life is not perfect, perhaps the imperfections add zest and meaning to it and truly help us to "get to know each other" (p.15,l.29).

When a couple decides to marry, they expect everyone to be happy for them and of course, families are supposed to accept the mate without reservation. If one cares for another, then all concerned should care also; it doesn't always happen this way as Mrs. Viorst quickly concludes:

My father was grateful
He wasn't a Negro or unemployed.
His father was grateful
I wasn't tubercular or divorced.

My mother was grateful
He wasn't barefoot.
His mother was grateful
I wasn't pregnant (p.13,ll.1-8).

In this poem, "Marriage and the Families," several ideas are expressed. The idea of appearance or image is again brought out by the implication that his family would be socially embarrassed if she were "pregnant" (p.13,l.4) or "divorced" (p.13,l.8), and her family would be humiliated if he were "barefoot" (p.13,l.2) or a "Negro" (p.13,l.6). These qualities or conditions would have to be explained to friends and neighbors and therefore are repugnant to the families. Another idea that is expressed in this poem is the parental fear of taking on additional responsibilities in the form of a "tubercular" (p.13,l.8) daughter-in-law or an "unemployed" (p.13,l.6) son-in-law. Lastly, this bare, unromantic idea of acceptance is quite difficult for one to perceive, especially when the beginning of a marriage is to be so completely loving for all concerned.

Mrs. Viorst's most humorous look at the romantic fantasy of women is found in the poem "Infidelity." The woman portrayed at the outset is dressed in "burnt-orange Dynel lounging pajamas with rhinestone buttons" (p.67, ll.1-2) and she decides that she is "looking more abandoned than usual" (p.67,l.3) which is the reason her husband's best friend made overtures. She states:

My pulse quickened,
And I could imagine...
Cryptic conversations.
Clandestine martinis.
Tumultuous embraces.

And me explaining
That I can't slip away on Thursdays because of cub
scouts.
And that long kisses clog my sinuses (p.67).

The idea that women need to be desired by men other than their husbands is repeated in this poem. Another idea that is repeated in this and other poems is that the woman does not physically succumb to her romantic fantasy but allows it to run its course in her mind. The progression of fantasy into reality is consistent in Mrs. Viorst's poems, and the idea of "what might be" fades into "what is." She allows herself only brief escapes in her mind and then returns to the reality of her situation.

Mrs. Viorst, after flirting with the subject of sex in several poems, limits herself to only one in which she discusses this aspect of marriage. The woman in the poem "Sex Is Not So Sexy Anymore" describes her nightly ritual of applying hormone creams to her face, completing her isometrics, and taking several glasses of water to the children. She also describes the little things about her husband and herself that reveal their imperfections and she muses about how love, a thing of romantic beauty, often has to contend with very unromantic, human frailties.

I greet my husband with a warm embrace,
A vision in my long-sleeved flannel nightgown,
And socks (because my feet are always freezing)(p.63).

Add this description to her habit of gulping down cold tablets for her "wheezing and tranquilizers for her nerve ends" (p.63,ll.7-8), and the fact that once in bed, all she and her husband talk about are the grocery bills and his "two dirty suits" (p.63,l.12), and the title of this poem, "Sex Is Not So Sexy Anymore," becomes quite vivid. Another stanza that helps

complete the image states:

> My rollers clink upon the pillow
> And his big toenail scrapes against my skin.
> He rises to apply a little Chap Stick.
> I ask him to bring back two Bufferin (p.63,ll.17-20).

Then again, as expected, Mrs. Viorst shifts to her romantic dreams as she conjures up a heaven-blessed couple, "oh somewhere there are lovely little boudoirs..." (p.63,l.21), that may be imbibing of marital perfection and felicity in "canopied" (p.63,l.22) downy beds with "Porthault sheets" (p.63, l.22). Somewhere the man of the house may be a story book hero who "lion-hunts in Africa on weekends" (p.63,l.23) and whose fair spouse "measures thirty-three around the hips" (p.63,l.24). This blissful twosome may spend hours together gazing into love-filled eyes over "brandy snifters" (p.63, l.25), while he romantically runs his fingers through her forty-dollar hairdo and the "nanny" (p.63,l.27) obediently watches their seraphic off-spring in the other wing of their mansion. True, this saccharin scene of marital harmony may exist somewhere, but in the home Mrs. Viorst pictures, strains of "dripping water" (p.63,l.29), not violins, fill the air for the husband forgot to patch the leaky roof and while he grabs the mop and she gets the bucket, they "both agree to try again next week" (p.63,l.32). The responsibilities of marriage multiply as time passes and trivialities tend to take priority over the romantic part of the union. No one is pleased when this overthrow happens and many work to keep it from happening, but slowly the "dirty suits" (p.63,l.12) and "grocery bills" (p.63,l.11) take precedence over the more romantic pleasures.

The expressions of romantic fantasy that emerge in most of Mrs. Viorst's poems are illustrative of the idealism that most women possess. This

romantic idealism is perhaps a carry-over from childhood when fairy princesses, heroes, and happy endings were all that was conceivable. Neither the aging process nor the educational process depreciates the value of this vivid, hopeful picture of happiness and Mrs. Viorst intimates that most women retain this picture during adulthood while most men do not. The initial idealism in her poems, however, is later supplanted by the awareness of reality and the consistency of this cycle exemplifies the ambiguity of the feminine mystique.

III. FINAL RECOGNITION OF REALITY

The third point that is so obviously illustrated in Mrs. Viorst's poems is the reality of her situation. The persona is reminiscent of one of Ezra Pound's characters, in his poem "Salutation", who believes there are three types of people: the ones who are free, the ones who recognize freedom but have not yet attained it, and the dullards who are so conformed to society's standards they are not even aware freedom exists. The persona is in the middle group because she is as aware of other's situations as she is of her own, but she does what she can to free herself. While she cannot dismiss her marriage or abandon her children, she can strive constantly to keep from sinking into the abyss of hopeless conformity that she feels engulfs most of her sister housewives. Her knowledge and awareness leads one to believe that there is hope for individual freedom if goals and desires are not forgotten.

The woman portrayed by Mrs. Viorst does not always exhibit that glimmer of reconciliation between her individual life and her married life. Many times she posits the idea that although she loves her husband and

children they have unintentionally stifled her own inner gowth, and she resents this restraint that has befallen her at such an inopportune time in her life--her youth. Her frequent allusions to contemporary thinkers and events indicate that she has expended some effort in becoming informed about her society; nevertheless, she expresses a realization of how much more knowledge and experience she has missed. In validation of this statement are the lines from her poem "In Paris":

> And in my heart of hearts I know
> I should have come here years ago
> When I had a total grasp of The Stranger and
> Gerard Philippe
> and the difference between a Cezanne and
> a Matisse without even peeking at the signatures,
> And when I had never heard of Whip'n Chill
> or contour diapers or term insurance,
> And when I would have been someone with unplumbed
> hidden depths,
> Instead of someone
> With color television
> In the rumpus room (p.57).

She realizes now that one must keep enlarging her talents and knowledge because taking another course and omitting these things will result in loss. Dante's statement "Possession is one with loss" would support her predicament at this time. As she became more interested in material objects, she lost precious time and the capacity for aesthetic appreciations.

Another poem that relates this same idea of conforming to material wealth and suburban middle-class expectations is "The Suburbs Are Good For The Children." "Split-level houses, oak-paneled dens, and civic clubs" (p.25,ll.10-11) are what most families settle on, decides Mrs. Viorst, and the woman she portrays here does not deviate from this pattern of conformity. The suburb has long had a powerful hold on the American

imagination. In the national mythology it is a place of status and security; it is the persistent dream of a place close to the city that also offers the calm of the country. As Mrs. Viorst places the persona between the two extremes in women, the suburb is also between the two extremes of the densely populated urban cores and the expanses of what remains of rural, small town America.

Many times families do what is "expected" even if the specific style of living is not one they desire. "Everyone knows children need"...is a statement designed to send families to the suburbs immediately. If this is the life style a family wants, nothing suffers, but as Mrs. Viorst states in the last two lines of the poem "The Suburbs Are Good For The Children":

> The suburbs are good for the children,
> But no place for grown-ups to be (p.25,ll.23-24).

Evident in this statement is the fact that the full potential of an adult cannot be nurtured in these suburban surroundings even with the aid of nature, consisting in this case of "three bushes, two shrubs, and one tree" (p.25,l.22), hardly Thoreau's Walden; therefore smothering to a budding thinker. One cannot meditate deeply in the uniform situations in which Mrs. Viorst's persona finds herself. The stereo-typed people, houses, and ideas offer no motivation to delving into profound philosophies or even remembering them. Day-to-day routine tends to automate housewives and drain them of any stimulating curiosity.

Even though the housewife Mrs. Viorst portrays lives in the suburbs, she does not completely identify with the other ladies on their similar streets. In the poem "The Suburbanites" she calls the other women "they"

and makes it extremely clear that she does not consider herself to be a part of the flock. She admits that "they love it" (p.27,l.1) in the suburbs and "they" maliciously cite scandalous reprisals at the town she seems to love, New York City. Lists of wrongs are enumerated, and one would suppose, to show the absurdity of it all, the persona agrees that one could probably live an entire lifetime on East Sixty-Fifth Street and "the Welcome Wagon would never bring a cake!" (p.27,l.35). This statement signifies the fatuous inanity of suburban thinking because as Mrs. Viorst implies, "Who really cares if Welcome Wagon brings a cake!" (p.27,l.18). These women also tell her that "You could drop dead in the middle of Times Square, and no one would even offer a glass of water" (p.27,l.18). Again the reader can almost hear Mrs. Viorst's sighs of futility for even attempting to converse with these conformists.

As if husbands and homes were not damaging enough to an aspiring artist alias housewife, babies also have been known to bring, along with joy, some chaotic disarray to any new home. People are naturally interested in and preoccupied with problems or situations that happen to be prevalent at any particular time. Therefore, in the poem "Nice Baby," it is painfully logical that conversations about "black humor and the impact of the common market on the European economy" (p.21,ll.1-2) have now evolved into talk about "nursing versus sterilization" (p.21,l.11) and most modern women understand completely when the persona states that "instead of finding myself I am doing my best to find a sitter" (p.21,ll.19-20).

But babies grow and the woman pictured by Mrs. Viorst again shows her anxiety over the reality of her situation when she states in the poem "The Generation Gap":

Our sons are growing up
And any day now
They'll be doing their own thing,
Telling it like it is,
Denouncing the military-industrial complex,
And never trusting anyone over thirty,
Even Parents
Who tried agitation
Before they did,
And alienation
Before they did,
And once never trusted anyone
Over thirty (p.69,ll.23-35).

She has tried to convince her children, as do most parents, that she does realize their positions because she once was in the situation, but she doubts that she is believed and this doubt is painful for her. If she is aware of reality, she wants other people to know that she is aware; the woman here is not one who would endure anonymity for any reason. If she has something to say, she wants others to listen. Even her studies and talent are not worthwhile for her alone: she wants others to see and admire, to express the recognition that she must have, and "to gasp at my one-man show" (p.15,l.15). Even her own children are supposed to appreciate her simply because, as she believes, she sacrifices for them. The least they could do, she surmises, is believe her when she tells them something that she knows to be true.

It is difficult for a young person to take the word of an adult, a member of the other side of the generation gap, and because of this loss of importance, most people dread passing the age of thirty. Mrs. Viorst explains this awkward situation in her poem, "It's Hard To Be Hip Over Thirty." The persona illustrates the reality of her situation, and assumes that she is not unique, by stating:

Meanwhile, the rest of us,
Serving Crispy Critters to grouchy three-year-olds
And drinking our Metrecal,
Dream of snapping our fingers to the music
If only we knew when to snap (p.33,ll.6-10).

In this one stanza she explains the plight of the person over thirty who gains weight more easily now because aging tends to make people less active. Also the idea of being restricted or limited because of children is again depicted. And the saddest part of all--the times have changed, the music has changed, and here is a woman who wants to keep up with the times and because of marital responsibilites, has been left completely behind. She wants to be "hip" (p.33,l.27) and openly states that she "longs to be kicky and camp-but the maid only comes once a week" (p.33,ll.16-17). (Mrs. Viorst's own definition of the word "hip", according to a television interview, is "knowing what's happening and hoping it will happen to you.") With only one day a week free from her duties at home she finds "orgiastic pot parties" (p.33,l.19) rather "impractical" (p.33,l.20). She seems to understand that her era is past and a new one established, but she still seems rather stunned by this fact because it seems only yesterday that she was "in" and now she is outmoded and out-of-place. This hard fact faces everyone, but Mrs. Viorst seems to believe along the lines of George Bernard Shaw when he admitted that "the only thing wrong with youth is that it's wasted on the young." She sees how much more she could have done with her life if she had not interrupted her youth with marriage. This idea, as often as it is stated, does not drip with the venom one might expect; it is just edged with some disappointment and regret. She does not once advocate affairs or divorce,she simply moves along in life, observing and wishing.

The reality of her situation also includes a mother-in-law who causes just the slightest bit of friction. When this woman comes to visit, "with her own apron and her own jar of Nescafe" (p.35,ll.3-5), she also brings the latest "news" (p.35,l.15). In the poem "A Visit From My Mother-in-Law," the persona listens to the mother-in-law talk on and on about all her relatives and neighbors without a word from her to interrupt the flow of the monologue concerning "Uncle Leo...divorcing Aunt Pearl, her sister... having a nervous breakdown, her own poor health, limp, flu, cataracts, and coughing" (p.35,ll.8-29). When the husband's mother ends by saying "and don't even bother to ask about Cousin Rose" (p.35,ll.33-35), Mrs. Viorst states, "I don't think I will" (p.35,l.36). Women have many things to disturb or distract them, and husbands and children are taken for granted in this category, but Mrs. Viorst's suggestion in this poem is quite strong. Complaining mothers-in-law are also deterrents to anyone with a zest for freedom and individuality. The woman Mrs. Viorst portrays is not against marriage itself, but against extreme conformity in one's life. She is definitely not the wife who spends most of the day at the next-door neighbors for coffee. Coffee sessions with neighbors rendering their biases and short-sighted outlooks would be as boring for this woman as some of the cocktail parties she attends, one must remember, for appearance's sake.

As the persona observes people in "The Cocktail Party," she presents a picture seen by most everyone. The wife is always passing food, the husband is "making passes or passing out cold on the coats in the bedroom" (p.47,ll.10-18), the mothers talk about "teething, day camps" (p.47,l.3), and as the party progresses "sex play" (p.47,l.19), and the fellows discuss "field goals and drain pipes" (p.47,ll.14-22). Mrs. Viorst also states

"that the fellow they swore was funnier than Joey Bishop is discussing tax breaks with the fellow they swore was funnier than Mort Sahl" (p.47, ll.5-7) and this type of frustration continues throughout the party. She recapitulates by proclaiming, "I'm not as out of place as I wish I were" (p.47,ll.25-26). This statement may be taken two ways. First, she is simply there and would like to physically be somewhere else, or else she realizes she fits in with these people more than she wishes she did and she does not want to be like them. It is as obvious that she does not like these people as it is evident that she favors others, such as some in France.

While traveling, the persona finds some people she believes are different almost to an extreme from the people who bore her in the United States. She discusses them in the poem "In Deauville." These people all have titles and money, and she watches in wonder when they "buy horses the way my father buys a good cigar" (p.55,ll.16-17). These "heiresses, scions, magnates, and contessas" (p.55,ll.9-10) wander in and out of the best restaurants, original fashion houses, and hotels with arrogance and hauteur and she stands in awe of them because they also "tell the waiter the champagne smells of cork with the assurance of those who have never saved trading stamps or attended a swim club cook-out" (p.55,ll.18-21). The persona, impressed by these people and their actions, naturally dreams of attaining some level of prestige herself, but she recognizes the reality of her situation and without chagrin, comments:

> And even if we had arrived
> With an Alfa Romeo,
> A yacht,
> His and her dinner clothes by Pierre Cardin,
> And a handwritten introduction from Francoise Sagan,
> They would still know
> We did not belong
> In Deauville (p.55,ll.22-29).

Mrs. Viorst states here and in several other poems that the persona is an individual. She cannot be duplicated in Suburbia, U.S.A. or in Deauville, France. There may be some "above" her and some "below" her, but she fits in neither category. She may not have money and a title, but she has a mind that has not been molded to preconceived ideas that are in style at a given time. Therefore she cannot be labeled as so many people are and she seems to be quite proud of this lack of labeling.

Because she feels that women are labeled and men are not, Mrs. Viorst, as other women, tend to bemoan this fact at times and become slightly accusative when discussing their predicament. In the poem "Where Is It Written" Mrs. Viorst most openly strikes out at men and the inequalities in marriage. Her first question:

> Where is it Written
> That husbands get twenty-five dollar lunches
> and invitations to South America for
> think conferences while
> Wives get Campbell's black bean soup and a trip
> to the firehouse with the first grade...
> (p.43,11.1-5)

The questioning gains with vigorous pessimism and borders on sheer disgust until the final stanza when she decides that it is time for her to spend some time on herself and let him "take the shoes to the shoemaker and the children to the pediatrician and the dog to the vet" (p.43,11.20-21). But after pondering for awhile she decides that if she actually got involved in something she wanted and made him perform the chores, there would be another problem and she ends by saying:

> Where is it written
> That she always has to feel
> Guilty? (p.43,11.23-25).

The guilt feelings would be so strong that she could not possibly enjoy these outside activities; therefore, she only considers them and this thinking leads to more frustration. Inner frustration can linger inside a person only so long until the breaking point is reached. Mrs. Viorst's persona reaches this point and reacts in a very feminine fashion.

The poem that comments on the eruption of an argument is properly called "Striking Back." Most women cannot physically avenge wrongs done to them by their husbands; therefore, they choose to use every other devious device and barrage of mental abuse known to man. This poem enumerates and explains various techniques for "striking back." The altercation begins when the husband unfortunately maligns his wife's intelligence by telling her to learn where Thailand is. He casts further aspersions on her taste by his dissatisfaction with the drapes; her desirability by telling her to cut her hair; and her maternal instincts by telling her to stop screaming at the children. Hurt by these "implicit" remarks, she is determined to strike back with all her feminine wiles.

She first tries her mother's technique of silence coupled with a mournful "brooding stare" (p.31,l.4). She does not wear make-up so her husband will think her paleness is due to a fatal illness caused by his harrassment. This method, she reports, "occasionally works" (p.31,l.8). Her next approach is a maniacal tirade of "weeping, cursing, expressions of bitter remorse" (p.31,l.10) followed by wild threats of his never expecting to see the children again and "calls pricing suites at expensive hotels" (p.31,l.12-13). She admits "limited success" (p.31,l.14) with this approach.

A more subdued and subtle method for striking back is the "psychoanalytic confrontation" (p.31,l.16). In this approach she calmly and

sorrowfully informs him that "his sadistic treatment of those who love him is a sign of unconscious feelings of inadequacy" (p.31,ll.19-20). She pities him in his wretched state but coolly informs him that he needs "help" (p.31, l.21). The efficacy of this procedure is evident in Mrs. Viorst's remark: "I've dropped this approach" (p.31,l.22).

Having exhausted all other means of retaliation, she begins on the only approach left, that of "total recall" (p.31,l.24). This approach enumerates "all the wrongs" (p.31,l.25) he has done her since they first met. Combine that with refusing an important social invitation, "tossing and moaning" (p.31,l.29) in her sleep, "threatening to commit suicide, take a lover" (p.31,l.30) and worst of all "drop out of the PTA" (p.31,ll.30-31), and she feels she had adequately abused, ridiculed, and threatened her way into successfully striking back. The marriage is not healthier after this outburst, but the woman has compensated somewhat for the way she feels she has been stifled. If one is only tolerating her existence and then is tormented also, the "insult has been added to injury" and there must be some retaliation.

Some wonder must be aroused as to why this woman remains in such a situation. There is one extremely simple reason. She loves her husband and children. Even though she wishes she had "made her mark" while young and unattached, the thought is not important enough for her to discard her home and family. The list of priorities that has been mentioned before now has the number one slot filled. A woman's needs are quite complex and the stifling of those intellectual and creative needs for years has made them seem even greater, but the desire to belong to a family of one's own is slightly above those needs and women will usually place family first as long as the family acknowledges her sacrifices for them.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The important consideration in the interpretation of Mrs. Viorst's poems from her book Its Hard To Be Hip Over Thirty and Other Tragedies of Married Life is that the ideas and opinions propounded in them are very personalized and self-expressive. These poems are expressions of Mrs. Viorst's personal philosophies of love, sex, money, and life in general. As such, they not only are witty and amusingly truthful observations of marriage and its foibles, but they also reveal much about Mrs. Viorst herself. Her experiences and opinions as a married woman "over thirty" who is "trying hard to be hip" form the basis of her poetry. An obvious and recurring irony in her poems is that when she tries the hardest to be hip--she fails. But when she drops all affectation and becomes just Judith Viorst, her ideas emerge with a "coolness" and a simple nonchalance that smack of today's hip society. Another recurring idea in almost all of her poems is that of initial idealism and inexperience being later supplanted by experience and awareness of reality. Throughout, however, Mrs. Viorst's amusing pessimism combined with her unconventional allusions and semantic ingenuity provide enjoyable insights into the world of marriage, love, and women trying hard to be hip over thirty.

The one poem that expresses all ideas written about, and the poem that could best summarize the book itself, is "Money". This poem is Mrs. Viorst's account of her attempts to immerse herself in the more worthwhile, intangible things of life like "Great Literature and Philosophy"

(p.38,l.5). Her attitude toward money at first was one of disdain and disgust, but she later realized the practical importance and necessity of money and the impracticality of reaching only "for the stars, Great Literature, and Philosophy" (p.39,ll.38-39).

The first stanza of "Money" reveals Mrs. Viorst's early philosophy of life. She tried hard to condition herself to the aesthetic life of "humble black turtleneck sweaters" (p.38,l.2) and the bleak sacrifice of living with only the barest necessities in a "spare unheated room" (p.38,l.3). These physical denials were to enhance the spiritual experience gained through meditating on the Kama Sutra, her few madrigals and other great literature and philosophy. Being in such a state of mind, naturally her opinion of money (the antithetical embodiment of the practical and non-spiritual things in life), credit cards and installment buying, was one of disdain. The great metaphysical and philosophical things of life (literature and philosophy) could never coexist with such harshly real things as a joint checking account mentioned in stanza two. Her idealistic outlook in the third stanza extends even to marriage, a union she thought was entered into by "two wonderfully spiritual human beings" (p.39,ll.11-12) who had nothing more important to do than "argue about great literature and philosophy" (p.39,l.15). Her naive conceptions of life however were shattered by the mundane practicalities of a stopped-up sink (which required a plumber and the money to pay him), and a houseful of dusty furniture and a pile of dirty laundry (which required an expensive cleaning lady). As she states, it is hard to be spiritual when the need for cold, hard cash is always present. Her dreams were completely deflated in the sixth stanza. She realizes that the "drab necessities" (p.39,l.36) like

the diaper service are not exactly conducive to spiritual meditation and the study of "great literature and philosophy" (p.39,l.37). She realizes that the real world is not all roses, yachts, and lovely things, and that her attempt at metaphysical escape with the Kama Sutra was the easy way out of a trying and burdensome life.

Omar Khayyam may have had time to drink wine with his bawd under a shade tree, but Mrs. Viorst realizes in the seventh stanza that the wisdom of the Rubaiyat is not enough for today's world of charge accounts and Diners' Club cards. She sums up in stanza eight her realizations that came with maturity. She no longer dwells on the romanticism of marriage but now sees the advantage of being practical (and having two cars to save steps). She used to look with contempt at the society that kept up its appearance with well-trimmed yards and other suburban necessities, but now she owns a power mower too and keeps her yard trimmed just like everyone else. No longer does she have time for the great literature and philosophy of her idealistic past, but she now faces the reality (though sometimes unattractive and earthly) of money and thus the reality of the practical, necessary things of life.

The message that comes from this poem and her other poetry is that maturity and youthful inexperience breed idealism, but this idealism is soon dissipated by the annoying interruption of reality. Thus soon, even the most confirmed aspirant of spiritual escape, the most confirmed dreamer, should be jolted from his rosy misconceptions of the hard cruel world and should see that the unpleasant, even trivial realities of life must be faced.

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